

Paul introduced the subject of spiritual gifts in the previous chapter, emphasizing that God has given different gifts to different people within His church for the edification of the church. Knowing that the Corinthians had a tendency toward pride and that they would become proud if they had been given one of the more visibly appealing gifts, Paul now makes the case that love for one another is superior to any spiritual gift.

In previous verse, Paul admits that the Corinthians should pursue the more effective gifts, but, as a preface to chapter 13, he declares that he will show them what is more valuable than any of the spiritual gifts (**1 Cor. 12:31** “*But covet earnestly the best gifts: and yet shew I unto you a more excellent way*”). In order to make his case, Paul begins by describing spiritual gifts that are exaggerated in their magnitude and yet are still inferior to love.

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1 Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.

**“Though I speak with the tongues [languages] of men and of angels”** – The legitimate gift of tongues involved the languages of men, as evidenced by the fact that on the day of Pentecost the visitors to Jerusalem were hearing their native language being spoken by the believers (**Acts 2:6-8** “*Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language. And they were all amazed and marvelled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which speak Galilaeans? And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born?*”). Paul exaggerates the gift to include the language of angels, something that we have no scriptural evidence of being true. Paul’s point is that even an exaggerated form of legitimate spiritual gifts is inferior to love. **“and have not charity [agape: God’s selfless love], I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal”** – In Paul’s day, some rituals honoring pagan deities included ecstatic vocalizations accompanied by gongs, cymbals and trumpets. Paul is saying that without love, the gift of tongues is no better than the gibberish and noises of a pagan ritual. Tongues without love is merely noise.

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2 And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.

**“And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries [unrevealed truth], and all knowledge [understanding]”** – The gift of prophecy refers primarily to preaching the word of God, but in the early church included predictions of the future. Paul, however, expands the gift to include an understanding of “all” mysteries and “all” knowledge. Even the OT prophets did not understand everything that the LORD gave them to speak, so Paul is exaggerating the gift beyond what God had actually given (**1 Pet. 1:10-12** “*Of which salvation the prophets have enquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that should come unto you: Searching what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow. Unto whom it was revealed, that not unto themselves, but unto us they did minister the things, which are now reported unto you by them that have preached the gospel unto you with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven; which things the angels desire to look into*”).

**“and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains”** – Jesus taught that someone with even a tiny amount of faith could move a mountain (**Matt. 17:20** “*And Jesus said unto them, Because of your unbelief: for verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you*”). However, the exaggeration here is if he had “all” faith so that he could move mountains at will.

**“and have not charity, I am nothing”** – Even if God had given Paul these gifts (prophecy and all faith) to the exaggerated degree that he described, he would still be nothing if he did not have the love of God for others at work in his life.

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3 And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.

**“And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor”** – God wants us to give to the poor, but he never asks us to give up everything that we own for them.

**“and though I give my body to be burned”** – Burning Christians at the stake did not come into practice until Nero became the Roman emperor, but it was considered to be a horrible form of execution. Here, Paul’s exaggeration is if he were willing to surrender his body to be burned in an act of devotion to Christ or perhaps for the sake of a fellow believer.

**“and have not charity, it profiteth [benefits] me nothing”** – If these things are not done out of love then they are useless gestures. If we are doing these things for selfish reasons (so that we might be rewarded by God or to get glory from man) and not because we love our fellow Christians, then they mean nothing.

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4 Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up,

Paul now lists some of the characteristics of love so that we can identify whether or not we have this love.

**“Charity [agape: God’s selfless love] suffereth long [patient when being done wrong], and is kind”** – The Greek word for charity is *agape*, which refers to the selfless love of God. This kind of love seeks what is best for others instead of what is best for us. This kind of love “suffereth long,” patiently enduring the wrong being done to itself and responding with kindness. That is because it seeks the benefit of the other person rather than trying to get even.

**“charity envieth not”** – Love does not become jealous when good things happen to others, but rejoices in it (1 Cor. 12:26).

**“charity vaunteth [boastful] not itself, is not puffed up [proud]”** – Love doesn’t seek to exalt itself in pride because its priority is what is best for others. Love focuses outward, not inward.

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5 Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil;

**“Doth not behave itself unseemly [unbecomingly; rude]”** – Love for others should prevent us from acting rudely or like a jerk.

**“seeketh not her own”** – Love does not prioritize what we want but allows others to have their way.

**“is not easily provoked [to make angry]”** – Since love is not seeking its own way, it is not easily angered when it doesn’t get it.

**“thinketh no evil”** – Love does not take offense when done wrong and so it does not hold a grudge.

6 Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; 7 Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

**“Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth”** – When we have been wronged by someone, it is easy to be pleased when they reap the consequences of their sin. However, love does not do that, but instead rejoices when they repent and return to the truth.

**“Beareth all things, believeth all things”** – Instead of seeking revenge or rejoicing when someone reaps what they have sown, love seeks reconciliation with their enemies (1 Pet. 4:8 *“And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins”*). Love also believes the best in others rather than the worst.

**“hopeth [an earnest trust and expectation] all things, endureth [to remain under a load] all things”** – Love expects the best from others, and will patiently wait for others to repent, even while continuing to suffer additional wrongs.

8 Charity never faileth: but whether *there be* prophecies, they shall fail; whether *there be* tongues, they shall cease; whether *there be* knowledge, it shall vanish away.

Paul now describes how that spiritual gifts, in contrast to love, will become obsolete once they have fulfilled their purpose.

**“Charity never faileth [to fall]”** – Love will never fall from its position of strength and effectiveness. It will endure throughout eternity.

**“but whether *there be* prophecies [speaking for God], they shall fail [to render idle or ineffective; to come to an end]”** – The word “prophecies” can refer to preaching or it can refer to predicting the future. The context in these verses seem to be referring to spiritual gifts, so Paul is likely saying that there would come a time when the gift of prophesy will no longer be necessary.

**“whether *there be* tongues, they shall cease”** – There would also come a time when the need for the gift of tongues will end.

**“whether *there be* knowledge, it shall vanish away”** – There will also come a time when the gift of knowledge will become obsolete.

9 For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. 10 But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.

**“For we know in part, and we prophesy in part”** – Those who exercise the gift of knowledge can only speak in a partial revelation. God does not reveal everything about Himself and the spiritual realm yet. The same is true of those who have the gift of prophesy, since they also can speak only of what God has revealed.

**“But when that which is perfect [brought to completion] is come, then that which is in part shall be done away”** – Commentators have debated on what Paul meant by “that which is perfect.” The word for “perfect” can refer to maturity in a figurative sense, which is consistent with Paul’s statement in the next verse. He seems to be referring to the time when we will have reached full spiritual maturity in God’s presence and will no longer be limited by our flesh’s sinful nature. At that time we will no longer need spiritual gifts to help us serve God because we will be spiritually complete.

11 When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

**“When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child”** – Paul now uses the analogy of comparing childhood to adulthood to illustrate how our understanding of spiritual things will be much greater than what we have now when we have reached full spiritual maturity in the presence of God.

**“but when I became a man, I put away childish things”** – Currently our understanding of the things of God is like that of a child compared to what it will be when we “become a man” (reach spiritual adulthood). Just as a human adult no longer needs the helps that he/she needed as a child, we will no longer need the spiritual gifts that God now gives us. A case could be made that just as a child no longer needs certain helps even before reaching full maturity, some spiritual gifts may become obsolete before others as the church matures. For instance, now that we have the completed scriptures, the use of the gift of prophecy to predict the future has diminished considerably. The same could be said of the gift of tongues.

12 For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

**“For now we see through a glass [mirror], darkly [obscured; in a riddle]; but then face to face”** – Mirrors in the ancient world were made of brass or some other polished metal and did not generate the near-perfect reflection that modern mirrors do. Paul is saying that currently we can only see the things of God “darkly” or in an imperfect and obscured way. But the day is coming when we will see God face to face and will have a clear and unobscured view of Him in His glory.

**“now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known”** – Even as an apostle, Paul admits that his knowledge of God was incomplete. What he didn’t know about God far outweighed what he did know. But in that future day when he will stand in God’s presence, he will be as familiar with God as God was with him. That doesn’t mean that Paul will know everything about God, but that he will know as much as a created being could. The same will be true of us.

13 And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these *is* charity.

**“And now abideth [to remain; to continue] faith, hope, charity, these three”** – Paul’s goal in this chapter has been to demonstrate the importance of love above all the spiritual gifts. The fact that he lists love along with faith and hope implies that he is not referring to faith, hope and love as spiritual gifts. Spiritual gifts are selectively given to saints (not all believers have the same gift). Spiritual virtues, however, are given to all believers. In contrast to the spiritual gifts mentioned, these three virtues will abide (remain) because their necessity will outlive all of the gifts.

**“but the greatest of these *is* charity”** – Love is the greatest of these virtues because it is the virtue that comes from God and most closely associates us with Him (1 John 4:7-8 *“Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love”*). Love is the virtue that best marks us as children of God.